

Laughter is her calling card

HOW DID YOU GET THIS NUMBER, by Sloane Crosley. Riverhead, 274 pp., \$25.95.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

There is only one answer to the question: Would you like to see a 3 a.m. performance of amateur Portuguese circus clowns?"

So begins the new collection of humorous essays from Sloane Crosley, author of the bestselling "I Was Told There Would Be Cake," which has the rare distinction, for a book of its genre, of having been bought for television by HBO. The mordant Crosley has been compared to David Sedaris, Fran Lebowitz, Sarah Vowell, Dorothy Parker and even Kingsley Amis. But do any of them have an HBO series?

Crosley's clever young Manhattanite shtick goes on the road here, with quirky observations filed from Lisbon, Alaska and Paris. Between voyages, she is back in her home bor-

ough buying illegal rugs and running into a childhood nemesis in the bathroom of a midtown Chinese restaurant.

Though many of the essays are a bit long, Crosley keeps the charm, humor and intelligence dials on high, and strews little narrative mysteries like bread crumbs to keep things moving.

My favorite essay, "Off the Back of the Truck," starts with the lines, "If you have to ask, you can't afford it. This is the second most useful piece of romantic advice I have ever received."

Both this admonition and the first most useful, revealed a few pages later, are delivered by Crosley's mother in reference to jewelry in the Tiffany catalog. But the catalog is just a glittering prelude to an elegantly constructed essay. Crosley launches two complementary story lines about love and value. Each has a man at the center. The first is a dude named Daryl, whom she encounters in an upscale store

"called something like Out of Your League or I Sleep in What You're Wearing." Daryl has an idea about how she can get the



Sloane Crosley: The right "Number" for humorous essays.

\$4,000 rug she's admiring for \$350 — and so begins a dalliance in black market shopping that becomes quite addictive.

The second story line features a fellow named Ben who is reading the Atlantic Monthly in a bar when she meets him, and this has instigated an unwanted conversation with the bartender. "You should've gone with Cat Fancy," she tells him.

"Well, now I don't need it," he says, putting the magazine away. "Now I have you."

My, my. How very Cary Grant of him. Though the author previews the catastrophe of this romance from the moment it begins, we are with her all the way. Particularly

when, months later, she receives a call from an angry woman who has found Crosley's number, identified as "Doug," in her boyfriend's cell phone. And then comes the meticulously charted agony of getting over it.

While Crosley's friends believe the healing process can be reduced to a mathematical equation based on how long a couple was together, the author finds this facile formula insulting. She really hurts. A lot. As a result, the jokes in this essay are shot through with real emotion. Every time Crosley goes a little deeper than expected, she surprises us into not only laughing, but caring.

And they lived unhappily ever after

PRIVATE LIFE, by Jane Smiley. Alfred A. Knopf, 317 pp., \$26.95.

BY CRAIG SELIGMAN
Bloomberg News

Though the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and the jailing of Japanese-Americans in World War II all figure prominently in Jane Smiley's "Private Life," the title is right for a novel about spouses who grow further apart each year.

Margaret Mayfield, Smiley's heroine, is 27 when she marries Capt. Andrew Jackson Jefferson Early, an astronomer who is 11 years her senior and, according to the general estimate (especially his own), very much her superior in wealth and genius.

The marriage has been arranged by their mothers. Andrew's mother recognizes how seriously her brilliant but intractable son needs a stabiliz-



Jane Smiley

ing influence. Margaret's mother considers a disagreeable marriage to a well-off oddball infinitely preferable to impoverished spinsterhood: "Romance, she'd said, was always the first act of a tragedy."

If Smiley weren't such a famous chameleon, it would be hard to believe these plain-speaking Missourians come

from the same pen that gave us the busy bunny rabbits of the randy "Ten Days in the Hills" three years ago (or the Shakespearean Iowans of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "A Thousand Acres" in 1991).

Andrew is an unusual character in fiction: a dedicated scientist whose ideas are flat wrong. At first, Margaret believes him to be the genius he considers himself; it takes her years to recognize him for what he is, "and she did it all at once, as if he had turned into a brick and fallen into her lap — who he was was that solid and permanent for her — he was a fool."

His closest literary equivalent is Mr. Casaubon in George Eliot's masterpiece of conjugal suffocation, "Middlemarch." But Margaret doesn't suffer with quite the same intensity that the idealistic Dorothea Brooke does when she marries Casaubon, because Margaret

has neither Dorothea's spirit nor her fineness of mind.

Though "Private Life" tells a chilling and demoralizing tale, that isn't at all how it reads. On the contrary, it's quietly absorbing, because we observe the marriage through Margaret's eyes, and Margaret is such a docile being, so bound by the prejudices of her era, that the scales don't fall from her eyes until late in her life.

The rancor that accrues like a suddenly discovered nest of termites in the book's final pages is almost as startling to the reader as it is to her. Smiley has laid the way for it plausibly and subtly, beginning with her ironic epigraph, from a 1935 novel by Rose Wilder Lane: "In those days all stories ended with the wedding."

It isn't the only way she hints that on the day in 1942 when we leave Margaret, at the age of 63, in the bitter flush of a spousal rage it has taken her 36 years to fully feel, her story may be just beginning.

this week

Readings & events on LI

Sunday

Southold children's author **Heather Hill Worthington** signs copies of "Miles of Smiles: The Story of Roxey, The Long Island Rail Road Dog" (Blue Marlin). At 3 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

Tuesday

Jim Peluso reads his children's book, "The Purple Porpoise Preserves the Planet With A 'P'" (Angelcrest Publishing). At 11 a.m., *Borders*, 1260 Old Country Rd., Westbury; 516-683-8700

Wednesday

Long Island children's author **Mary Ellen McDonald** reads "Wiggly and Skypie Visit the Pollution Planet" (Legwork Team Publishing). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

Thursday

Sci-fi and fantasy author **David Weber**, right, reads from "Mission of Honor," an Honor Harrington novel (Baen). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com



Saturday

Sag Harbor novelist **Alan Furst**, below, reads from "Spies of the Balkans" (Random House). At 6 p.m., *Canio's Books*, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor; 631-725-4926, caniosbooks.com

